



WHETHER you live in the city or the country, a moment of tranquility could be as close as your own

backyard. A backyard is the perfect escape—a private place where you can relax after a hectic day and let nature compose a soothing lullaby that calms your nerves. Imagine walking out your back door and into a tranquil garden where flowers bloom, butterflies hover, birds sing, and water softly trickles. As the sun goes down, you can illuminate your favorite corner with a soft spotlight and continue to unwind as night approaches. Sound too good to be true? Not if you learn about backyard conservation. Your back yard can easily be transformed into a natural haven for birds, blooms, and beauty—a place of tranquility.

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, which has traditionally worked closely with farmers, ranchers and other rural land users, is now providing advice for homeowners and urban residents through a program called "Backyard Conservation." This

program showcases 10 simple conservation practices for the backyard—terracing, tree planting, composting, mulching, wildlife habitat, wetlands, ponds, water conservation, nutrient management, and pest management.

You don't have to do a lot or spend a lot to make your yard a more inviting place for birds, nature, and your family. The right plants or trees and a few simple conservation practices can make a huge difference.

Whether your back yard is measured in flower pots, feet, or even acres—no matter how vast or cozy—there's room for backyard conservation. You can beautify and protect your own back yard using the very same conservation practices that our nation's farmers and ranchers have used to beautify and protect the American countryside for decades.

On the Farm

Farmers have always known the benefits of tree plantings. They use them for windbreaks and to provide shelter for food and wildlife. Trees can shelter livestock and crops; they are used as barriers to slow winds that blow across large cropped fields and through farmsteads. Windbreaks can be beneficial in reduc-

ing blowing and drifting snow along roadways. Farmstead and field windbreaks and tree plantings are key components of a conservation system. They also help prevent dust particles from adding to smog over urban areas.

In Urban Areas

One of the most popular Backyard Conservation practices is tree planting. Trees add beauty and so much more. Trees in your back yard can be home to many different types of wildlife. Trees can also reduce your heating and cooling costs, help clean the air, add beauty and color, provide shelter from the wind and the sun, and add value to your home.

Choosing a Tree

Choosing a tree should be a well thought-out decision. Tree planting can be a significant investment in money and time. Proper selection can provide you with years of enjoyment and can significantly increase the value of your property. However, an inappropriate tree for your property can be a constant maintenance problem or even a hazard. Before you buy, take advantage of the abundant references on gardening at local libraries,



universities, arboretums, parks where trees are identified, native plant and gardening clubs, and nurseries. Some questions to consider in selecting a tree include:

- What purpose will this tree serve?
- Is the species appropriate for my area?
- How big will it get?
- What is the average life expectancy of the tree?
- Does the tree have any particular ornamental value such as leaf color or flowers and fruits?
- Does the tree have any particular insect, disease, or other problem that may reduce its usefulness?
- How common is this species in my neighborhood or town?
- Is the tree evergreen or deciduous?

After you answer all these questions and go out and purchase your trees, you have to decide exactly where to plant them. Proper placement of trees is critical for your enjoyment and their long-term survival. Check with local authorities about regulations pertaining to placement of trees. Some communities have ordinances restricting placement of trees within a specified distance of a street, sidewalk, streetlight or other utilities.

Before planting your tree, consider the tree's ultimate size. When the tree nears maturity, will it be too near your house or other structures? Be considerate of your neighbors. An evergreen tree planted on your north side may block the winter sun from your next door neighbor. Will it provide too much shade for your vegetable and flower gardens? Most vegetables and many flowers require considerable amounts of sun. If you intend to grow plants that require a great deal of sunlight, consider how the placement of trees will affect them. Will the placement obstruct driveways or sidewalks? Will it cause problems for buried or overhead utilities? It is much easier to consider these things before you plant your trees than it is to remove the trees five or 10 years later.

Planting a Tree

A properly planted and maintained tree will grow faster and live longer than one that is incorrectly planted. Trees can be planted almost any time of the year as long as the ground is not frozen. Early fall through winter is the optimum time to plant trees in Alabama. This gives the tree a chance to establish new roots before new foliage emerges in the spring. When spring arrives, the tree is ready to grow. Planting in hot summer weather should be avoided.

Maintenance

For the first year or two, especially after a week or so of extremely hot or dry weather, watch your trees closely for signs of moisture stress. If you see leaf wilting or hard, caked soil, water the trees well and slowly enough to allow the water to soak in. This will encourage deep root growth. Keep the area under the trees mulched. Fertilization is usually not needed for newly planted trees. Depending on soil and growing conditions, fertilizer may be beneficial at a later time.

Pruning

Usually pruning is not needed on newly planted trees. As the tree grows, lower branches may be pruned to provide clearance above the ground, or to remove dead or damaged limbs or suckers that sprout from the trunk. Sometimes larger trees need pruning to allow more light to enter the canopy. Small branches can be removed easily with pruners. Large branches should be removed with a pruning saw. This will allow the tree to grow over the wound quickly without the use of sealants. Major pruning should be done in late winter or early spring. So, whether you live on a farm or in an urban neighborhood, think about planting trees—not only for the aesthetics but also for the tremendous conservation benefits they provide. 🌳

Source: *Natural Resources Conservation Service. To receive a free, 28-page color booklet and 10 tip sheets on adapting conservation practices to your own backyard, call (toll free) 1-888-LANDCARE or your local office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.*